

Description

Method for the Progressive Control of Heating elements

BACKGROUND OF INVENTION

[0001] 1. Field of the Invention:

[0002] The present invention relates to a method to control the heating of heating elements, particularly heating elements in a seat of an automotive vehicle. The invention operates in a progressive manner and is adapted to controlling said heating elements' state at all times.

[0003] 2. Description of the Related Art:

[0004] US patent 6,252,208 issued on June 26, 2001 to Topp teaches a method and a circuit for controlling the heating current of a seat heater according to the temperature. The same reference teaches a control system based on varying the control signals applied to the heating element from a fixed table saved in ROM memory, which relates application time values of said signals with temperature values

monitored through a temperature sensor arranged in said heater. Additionally, US patent 6,252,208 does not take into account that the heating elements can be different or, especially, have different physical features throughout their useful life, and that these can be modified, particularly in the case of their application in the seat of an automotive vehicle. Their features and performance can significantly vary according to the weight, position and span of the person using the seat and also according to the surrounding environment.

[0005] US patent 3,768,156 issued on October 30, 1973 to Caird et al teaches a method for manufacturing heating panels based on the use of electric conducting polymers, to form a flexible resistive and electricity-conducting element. A voltage is applied through two electrodes connected to each of said elements with the object of heating the heating panel. This reference, although it indicates that the temperature of the panel could be controlled by including a thermostat, does not teach a method for carrying out said control.

[0006] There is still a need for a reliable and practical method for controlling the heating of such heating elements. It is therefore desirable to provide a more reliable method for

controlling the temperature of said heating elements. The present invention takes into account the heating elements' possible variations of form, depending on the pressure applied to it and the distribution thereof. The present invention also addresses the variation of the heating elements' resistive and conductive features, including those dependent on external parameters such as the temperature of the area in which the heating element is arranged. The present invention also addresses the fact that different materials can be used and arranged such that they form different structures, thus forming different heating elements which obviously will not react in the same way to the same control signal.

[0007] *Description of the invention*

[0008] In one aspect of the method of the present invention the at least one heating element is constantly monitored and adjusted by the use of a control signal applied to the at least one heating element, thereby individually controlling each said at least one heating element for each condition constantly over time. This control signal is generated by means of monitoring the progression of the state in which each heating element is in at all times, which is carried out by monitoring the temperature thereof through a

temperature sensor arranged for that purpose on each heating element.

[0009] According to a further aspect of the present invention, the method for progressively controlling the heating of different heating elements, particularly those applicable to a seat of an automotive vehicle, is of the type in which said control is carried out by means of an electronic circuit utilizing Pulse Width Modulation (PWM), based on the temperature monitored in said heating element. Said method is characterized in that the signals to be applied to the heating element are constantly adapted to the current conditions of each individual heating element, throughout the life thereof. This adaptation being obtained by the variation of the working cycle of a voltage signal applied to individually to each heating element in the form of a fixed frequency pulse train, and applying said signal after an initial transient state during which a maximum voltage has been applied to each said heating element.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF DRAWINGS

[0010] Figure 1 shows a graphic representation of the signal to be applied to the heating element, in the form of voltage over time, by the method of the present invention.

[0011] Figure 2 shows a graphic representation of the progres-

sion of the temperature in a heating element due to different control signals.

[0012] Figure 3 shows a schematic view of one preferred embodiment of an electronic circuit suitable for use in applying the method of the present invention.

[0013] Figure 4 shows a schematic view of another preferred embodiment of an apparatus suitable for applying the method of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0014] The method for progressively controlling the heating of different heating elements, particularly applicable to a seat 8 (Figure 4) in an automotive vehicle, utilizes a control circuit 1 (Figures 3 and 4), said heating being controlled by a temperature-dependent heating current applied to at least one heating elements 2 (Figures 3 and 4) by means of Pulse Width Modulation (PWM), said temperature being monitored by means of, at least, one temperature sensor 4 (Figures 3 and 4) associated to said heating at least one said element 2 (Figures 3 and 4). In one preferred embodiment, the at least one heating element 2 (Figure 4) is formed by a mesh heating element or MAT. Said method of the present invention comprises progressively adapting a voltage signal to be applied to the at

least one heating element 2 (Figures 3 and 4) to the physical attributes of each of said at least one heating element 2 (Figures 3 and 4) and monitoring said at least one heating element's 2 (Figures 3 and 4) individual responses to the immediate surrounding environment, at all times throughout the life thereof. The method of the present invention comprises: (a) an initial transient state 5 (Figure 1), during which state a maximum voltage is applied to the at least one heating element 2 (Figures 3 and 4), and it is maintained until the at least one heating element 2 (Figures 3 and 4) reaches a desired percentage, such as 90%, of an assigned temperature previously chosen from among a series of preset values and stored in a ROM memory (not shown); (b) a permanent state 6 (Figure 1), during which a voltage is applied to the at least one heating element 2 in the form of a fixed frequency pulse train and variable working cycle. Based on several control parameters, the variation of said working cycle will be precisely determined to provide the desired temperature in the at least one heating element 2 (Figures 3 and 4). This is achieved by monitoring the temperature in the at least one heating element 2 (Figures 3 and 4) by means of a temperature sensor 4 (Figures 3 and 4), such as for exam-

ple, an NTC resistance arranged in a shunt bridge structure.

[0015] For a maximum applied voltage, different sets of monitored temperature values in the at least one heating element 2 (Figures 3 and 4) are obtained during said transient state 5 (Figure 1), i.e. before the at least one heating element 2 (Figures 3 and 4) reaches the desired percentage of said assigned temperature, such as for example 90%. These values are used for calculating said control parameters using the equation:

[0016] (Equation A here)

[0017] wherein T is the monitored temperature; T_f is said assigned temperature, selectable from among at least two preset values.

[0018] By using this equation and the measured values, the parameter τ will be accurately determined.

[0019] Once said percentage of the assigned temperature T_f has been reached, the permanent state 6 (Figure 1) will begin, during which state the temperature T of each of the at least one heating element 2 (Figures 3 and 4) will continue to be monitored periodically, and from each set of values formed by T , T_f and τ , a corresponding value of a certain working cycle of said voltage signal to be applied to the at

least one heating element 2 (Figures 3 and 4) will be obtained, all these values forming a table, which can be called a dynamic table, while the working cycle of the pulse train of the control signal varies progressively.

[0020] The advantages of the combination of said transient and permanent states can be seen in Figure 2. In said Figure 2, the curve 11 represents the progression of the temperature of the heating elements 2 (Figures 3 and 4) over time, when the generated signal, to be applied during the permanent state 6, has been applied to said heating elements 2 (Figures 3 and 4) based on the method of the present invention from a beginning, ignoring the transient state 5. The curve 12 also represents the progression of the temperature over time when the maximum voltage is being applied constantly to the heating elements 2 (Figures 3 and 4). Finally, curve 13 shows how the temperature progresses over time in the heating elements 2 (Figures 3 and 4) when the present method is applied in its entirety, i.e. the maximum voltage during the transient state 5 (Figure 1), and the fixed frequency pulse train and variable working cycle during the permanent state 6 (Figure 1). With this, the advantages of curves 11 and 12 are combined, in the form of a rapid increase of the temperature at the be-

ginning, as in curve 12, and greater stability, control and limitation of the temperature, as in curve 11, once the desired percentage of said assigned temperature T_f is reached.

[0021] An embodiment of an electronic circuit representative of a typical apparatus for use with the present invention is shown in Figure 3. In said Figure 3, the temperature sensor 4 is an NTC resistance which, together with a resistance R connected to a reference voltage V_{REF} , forms a voltage divider whose intermediate point is connected to an analog/digital converter 9 that transforms the variations in the form of voltage drop, said variations occurring in the NTC resistance as a response to the temperature variations therein, into digital data which are sent to said control circuit 1, which is responsible for analyzing and processing said data and, based on the data, applying a control signal in pulse train form, to a transistor 3 connected in tandem with the heating element 2, which in turn is fed, through its other end, at a voltage V_{BAT} coming from a battery arranged inside of said automotive vehicle, allowing voltage to heat said element 2 when the transistor 3 is activated.

[0022] Another preferred embodiment of the method of the

present invention is shown in Figure 4, comprising arranging at least two heating elements 2, one of them arranged in a backrest 7 of an automotive vehicle and the other one in a seat 8 of the automotive vehicle, with a tandem electrical connection connecting a free end of one heating element 2 in said backrest 7, to a normally open contact of a solid state relay, or to the source of a transistor 3, such as an FET, forming part of the control circuit 1, and a free end of the other heating element 2 in said seat 8, to ground. Figure 4 also shows how a temperature selector 10, connected to the control circuit 1, may be included for selecting the assigned temperature T_f .

[0023] It will be appreciated that there are a great number of other possible applications besides those illustrated herein, depending, for example, on where the heating elements 2 are arranged. Thus the present invention is also suitable for example, with heating elements located in a portion of an automotive vehicle, such as a panel, dashboard or armrest; arranged in a part of an interior of a building; incorporated in a piece of furniture; incorporated in an electric blanket or cushion; and incorporated in an outerwear garment.

[0024] Although the preferred embodiments of the present in-

vention has been disclosed, various changes and modifications may be made without departing from the scope of the invention as set forth in the appended claims.